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SUBJECT: COMMENTATOR TALKS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC

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[¶1.](#) Summary. In a recent discussion with diplomats and media representatives, professor of political science and well-regarded newspaper columnist Sahin Alpay predicted that Turkey will achieve democratic consolidation with or without EU support, and offered a broad apologia for the lackluster performance the past three years by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Introduction

[¶2.](#) (U) On January 10, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (of which controversial Turkish imam Fethullah Gulen is honorary president) sponsored a discussion titled "Why is AKP Disillusioning the Liberals," one of a series of talks being sponsored by the Foundation. The speaker was Dr. Sahin Alpay, professor of political science at Bahcesehir University and well-regarded newspaper columnist for Gulen-affiliated newspapers Zaman and Today's Zaman. While the newspapers generally are supportive of AKP, Alpay said he was not affiliated with any party and described himself as sometimes a critic and sometimes a supporter of AKP. He said that he spent his senior year of high school in the United States, was a committed communist as a young man, and in the 1990s worked briefly as an advisor to Deniz Baykal, leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). He is one of the signatories to the petition (strongly criticized by AKP Prime Minister Erdogan) apologizing for the events of 1915 (Ref B). Alpay considers himself to be a "social democrat in the Swedish model."

Turkish Democracy: Unfulfilled Promise and Hope

[¶3.](#) Alpay described Turkey as having among the world's oldest democratic traditions, rooted in the Tanzimat reforms of the late 1700s. He outlined three important "dynamics" in the recent evolution of liberal democracy within Turkey. First was the "Ozal Revolution" of the 1980s (named after then-PM Turgut Ozal), in which the Turkish economy was opened to global competition. Second was the customs union with the EU, which in the 1990s created a new elite of religious and conservative people from the Anatolian heartland, who want further democratization and EU integration. Third is the "liberal-critical discourse" conducted by liberal intellectuals. As a result, a "period of silent revolution" has begun, in which many legislative changes are occurring. Nevertheless, Alpay feels democracy has not yet been fully consolidated, and gave as "outrageous" examples the military's continued meddling in politics and the

Constitutional Court's repeated "unconstitutional" behavior (e.g., it temporarily delayed the selection of Gul as president; it overturned the constitutional amendment permitting headscarves in schools; and it almost shut down the AKP).

¶4. Alpay said that intellectuals like him came from various "radical" backgrounds, but through their experiences became convinced of the value of liberal democracy. At the same time, he said, "modernist Islamic thinking" (as manifested, for example, by Gulen and AKP) evolved along those same lines. He emphasized that the Turkish Islamic movement has gradually reformed and liberalized itself and is nothing like those which exist in authoritarian regimes. He called this "one of the greatest miracles" of the Turkish democratization movement and characterized AKP as the "most reformist party" since the Ozal days. In response to a question, Alpay vigorously denied that either AKP or the Gulen movement had a "hidden agenda" to bring sharia law to Turkey (a common accusation of their opponents), and claimed that their conversion to liberal democratic values was sincere.

¶5. Alpay thinks even the military is beginning to see that democratic reform is necessary. He believes the military is genuinely changing, thanks to the "broad debate" that is going on. He had particular praise for TGS head Ozkok, whom he claims stopped a military coup. He quoted Ozkok as saying "What the people want shows us the way." Alpay has no fear of a military backlash from the Ergenekon prosecution (Ref A), saying "authoritarian elements" will not be able to make a comeback and the trial is a very important turning point that is proceeding with at least the tacit consent of the military. He conceded that there may have been "mistakes and improprieties" in the conduct of the investigation, but considers them to be "minor" compared to the principle being established.

¶6. Alpay said that the most important reform for Turkey at this point is a new constitution, that will "reformulate" Turkish identity in a manner that is acceptable to the Kurds. He claimed even the military, which drafted the current constitution after the 1980 coup, recognizes the need for a new constitution. Regarding the infamous Section 301 of the Penal Code (which criminalizes various acts of lese majeste), he noted that although he himself might be prosecuted under that section (for his participation in the Armenian apology), he thinks that the recent amendments to the section (Ref C) provide adequate freedom of speech. He criticized the Turkish media for being very poor on standards, but said that there is adequate room for informed discussion.

¶7. According to Alpay, the two major stumbling blocks to democratization are the "positivist/materialist" secularism introduced by Ataturk, and the state's intolerance of and discrimination against any identity or culture other than the officially-sanctioned Turkish identity and culture. He criticized the educational system for serving these two policies, and noted that increasingly parents are instilling contrary (i.e., liberal) values in their children at home.

Praise and Criticism for AKP and CHP

¶8. Alpay called the AKP the first "mass party," with proper party organization and a "leadership cadre" much broader than, for instance, the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), whose leader Deniz Baykal he called a "dictator." He admires AKP's foreign policy, specifically mentioning its policy of Strategic Depth. He says that AKP learns from its mistakes (implicitly, unlike other parties), and engages in intense internal discussions about its policies. Alpay lamented that, in Turkey, a liberal democratic "discourse" does not engage the populace, who are mobilized only by an Islamic or nationalist "discourse," and noted that the AKP does not have a dialog with critical-liberal people. He thinks that in the upcoming local elections the economy and efficiency of local government will be the two big factors,

and that while the AKP vote will fall, it will still carry most municipalities, due to the weakness of the opposition parties.

¶19. Alpay noted that while CHP is currently sclerotic, its history indicates it could in the future become an agent of change: In the 1950s, CHP introduced the concept of citizens rights and freedoms that could not be restricted by Parliament. In the 1960s and 1970, CHP introduced the concept of the social welfare state. In the 1980s and 1990s, CHP raised the idea of cultural rights. And, in 1992, Baykal came up with a "magnificently" liberal party platform.

Why EU Reforms Have Stalled

¶10. Alpay said some liberals have since 2005 begun to criticize AKP because of the slow pace of reform. He said he does not share that criticism, and listed several reasons why AKP's efforts to make the reforms necessary for EU accession have stalled: (a) the enthusiasm of the EU has cooled; (b) the enthusiasm of the Turkish military (which, he said, at one time was a strong supporter of accession) has cooled; (c) CHP support has cooled; (d) PKK violence resumed in 2004; (e) relations with Washington deteriorated in the wake of the Iraq war; and (f) last summer AKP was nearly shut down for supposedly antiseclar activities.

¶11. As proof of AKP's continuing commitment to liberal values, Alpay pointed to the recent beginning of state TV broadcasts in Kurdish and on the Alevi religion. He further expects that public secondary schools will start offering Kurdish elective courses in the near future. He also said that the recent appointment of AKP Vice Chairman Egemen Bagis as chief EU negotiator signals a "restart" of the EU process.

¶12. Alpay thinks Turkey is "very close" to consolidating democracy, and will do so with or without EU help, although he acknowledged that this will take longer and produce more internal conflict without EU help. Indeed, he said, it would make a big difference if France would make clear that it supports Turkey's accession. Unless EU shows more enthusiasm for the process than it has recently, Alpay does not think that Turkey will move further on Cyprus. He finds it "amazing" that public support for EU accession is as high as 49 percent, given the EU's lack of interest.

¶13. Comment: The Istanbul leftist intellectual commentariat has for some time been chewing over the question of whether to continue to support AKP. The larger question is, &Who cares?⁸ While leftist thought has some influence among Istanbul's universities and think tanks, there is almost no support among voters for leftist parties, which undoubtedly explains why (as Alpay notes) the AKP has shown no interest in cozying up to the left even as it pursues policies that the left finds attractive. End comment.

Wiener